



My name is Rico. Growing up I had good parents, but for some reason my father suddenly began drinking heavily. He became physically abusive toward me and before long I found myself looking for love and acceptance in all the wrong places. I started drinking at age 13. Then I went to drugs. But to sustain my drug habit I needed money, so I turned to a life of crime. I'd rob from businesses and regarded myself as a big criminal. But everyone gets caught sooner or later and I was no exception. I received an 11 year prison sentence and did most of that prison time.

My last run-in with the law was in 2001. That's when the authorities said I'd never again see the light of day. But God intervened in the heart of the judge. I'll never forget the day he said, "Mr. Ramirez, I don't know why I'm doing what I'm about to do. But I see a court room of 40 of your supporters. I've received piles of letter saying you're a changed man."

That's when the judge dropped the bombshell. He said he would sentence me to only one year in county jail. The female bailiff had tears in her eyes when she looked at me and said, "I've never seen anything like that ever happen in my life."

We're losing too many of our best and brightest to the gangs

I finally learned my lesson and I have been clean ever since. Soon after I was released I had the privilege of serving as the Oxnard Police Department's Gang intervention Director. For several months I was able to work with at-risk young people. I told them my story and always prayed they would not follow in my footsteps.

The grant to work with the Police Department unfortunately has now ended and I'm doing as much ministry as I can on my own. In fact, right now I'm getting at least three calls a week from distraught mothers whose children are in gangs. These mothers beg me to talk to their kids...and I do...if I have the chance.

Here's the bottom line. We're losing hundreds of our best and brightest to the gangs each year here on the central coast. By age 17 many are already hard core. These kids need a family of concerned Christians who care whether they live or die. They also need youth centers *on their own turf* where they can play and interact with others in a positive atmosphere.

I'm grateful to the Santa Barbara Presbytery for all it is doing to provide a new way of life for those in gangs, especially through Radiant Word of Life. But we need to do so much more. Time is not on our side.

If you and your congregation would like to help fund a gang prevention initiative I'd like to connect with you. My email address is ricoramirez805@yahoo.com. I also encourage you to visit www.sbpres.org to access materials you can use in your church.

God bless you for reaching out to so many youth who are at risk.

Your friend,

Rico